ATREUS CALLIDUS: THE TRAGIC AFTERLIFE OF PLAUTUS'S COMIC HERO*

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Abstract: This article argues that the model of the Plautine *seruus callidus* underpins Seneca's Atreus, whose similarities to the clever slave include verbal mastery; metatheatrical plotting; eavesdropping; and cultivating a special relationship with the audience. Analysis of these parallels is situated in the broader frame of theatre history to show how comedy can influence tragedy, and how the *Thyestes'* blend of tragic and comic material makes Atreus Seneca's most distinctive and enduring character. The paper's final section addresses Atreus's afterlife, examining how Shakespeare reimagines the Senecan protagonist's tragicomic mix in the characters of Hamlet and Iago.

Atreus is the archetypal Senecan villain: clever, ruthless, unscrupulous, self-obsessed, and strangely charismatic. He exerts fascination as a study in the corrupting effects of unfettered power and the moral vacuity of excessive self-regard. But there is a further facet of his magnetism that has so far escaped scholarly notice: Seneca's Atreus is modelled on the Plautine *seruus callidus*,[1] to whom he owes his intelligence, theatricality, and the skills in deception that

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make him such a compelling villain. Atreus embodies the Plautine comic hero transposed to the realm of tragedy, where his playfulness comes at a much higher human cost. The resemblance is built from a constellation of factors including verbal cleverness, the triumph of wit, metatheatrical plotting, and audience complicity. Long recognized as defining traits of the Plautine slave,[2] these features are likewise fundamental to Atreus's portrayal and can be seen informing all his actions despite obvious – and major – differences in the plays' subject matter.

In contrast to this specific Plautine influence, humor in the *Thyestes* has not passed unacknowledged, and extant work on this topic forms an important background to my present investigation.[3] But a distinction also needs to be made in this regard, because the *Thyestes*' borrowings from *comoedia palliata* do not have to be funny *per se*, and often pertain to the conventions and tropes of Plautine comedy rather than its jokes. This, then, is an analysis of what Bernd Seidensticker would call the 'comedy' elements in tragedy, i.e. conventions and

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[1] The first to broach the topic (aside from this article) is Lund (2023) 178–212. Atreus's similarity to the *servus callidus* has also been noted briefly by Schiesaro (2003) 56 and 136.

[2] A large topic, for which I offer a mere selection of scholarship. On verbal cleverness: Wright (1975); Slater (2000) 97–120; Anderson (1993) 113–16; Gunderson (2015) 57–59. On the triumph of wit: Segal (1987) 104–36. On metatheatre: Moore (1998) 67–77 and 92–107; Slater (2000). On asides and audience complicity: Moore (1998) 8–49. Excellent summary of the tricky slave's main features is provided by Schironi (2014) 449–58.

[3] Meltzer (1988) is the main study. The play's grim humour is also addressed in commentaries by Tarrant (1985) and Boyle (2017) and receives some attention from Littlewood (2004) 185–86 and 234–35, and Haley (2019).

dramaturgical strategies that belong to comedy as a genre, and not the 'comic' elements, which are (potentially) funny, and may occur independent of any influence from actual comic drama.[4] Granted *Thyestes* is humorous in its portrayal of the victim's greedy feasting, or Tantalus' ironic praise of his descendants, but the focus of this article lies elsewhere, in the play's thematic and scenic evocation of Plautine *palliata*, which in turn highlights Atreus's similarity to the *seruus callidus*.

Comedy into Tragedy

Before I plunge into the parallel worlds of Seneca's Atreus and Plautus's clever slave, a few remarks about this study's significance and academic context are in order, for this investigation is not just about generic enrichment (a species of *Plautinisches im Seneca*, if you will), but has broader bearing on the development of Western theatrical traditions and the relationship between the genres of tragedy and comedy.

Its first major consequence is to show how comedy can influence tragedy rather than the other way around, which is the direction most often proposed and pursued by scholars. Conventional narratives of dramatic evolution in ancient Greece, and from Greece to Rome, cast comedy in a parasitic role, examining how it parodies and appropriates material from its solemn sister genre to create new, hybrid forms;[5] much has been made, for instance, of Menander's

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[4] Seidensticker (1978) 305–6.

[5] A simple, revealing example is the amount of scholarly attention paid to Old Comedy's parody of tragedy, while hardly any has been paid to tragedy's adaptations of / references to Old Comedy. Herington (1963) is an outlier, as is the recent work of Jendza (2020). On Old Comic (chiefly, Aristophanic) borrowings from tragedy, Rau (1967) is the

borrowings from Euripides.[6] Such narratives are justified to the extent that they are conditioned by available evidence and elucidate actual trends; I am not disputing the core of their validity. But comedy's voice also needs to be heard in what was surely a complex and multi-layered dialogue; generic influence rarely goes just one way.

The difficulty, of course, is that the relationship between the two genres is not bilateral. Comedy can borrow openly from tragedy, quoting or paraphrasing, or imitating characters and scenes, without destabilizing its own comic atmosphere. Tragedy, on the other hand, must be more circumspect in its references to comic material, for fear of disrupting its seriousness and making its gravity appear bombastic. This is not to say that tragedies don't have funny moments: from Dionysus' dressing of Pentheus in the *Bacchae* to the porter in *Macbeth*, comic episodes serve to relieve tension and distract, momentarily, from the plays' mounting sense of disaster.[7] They can also accentuate rather than dispel tragedy's gloom.[8] But, aside from these obviously comic scenes, comedy's presence in tragedy remains difficult to detect because it tends to be

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foundational study, while Farmer (2017) provides a thorough, up-to-date account plus coverage of fragmentary material. On New Comic (chiefly, Menandrean and *comoedia palliata*) borrowings from tragedy, Hunter (1985) 114–36 is an informative overview. Menandrean New Comedy has been characterised as a 'hybrid' genre by Arnott (1986) and Petrides (2010). For the transition from Greece to Rome, we may note the role played by mythological burlesques, which are also understood to have adapted and parodied tragic material: see Konstantakos (2014).

[6] Menander's debt to Euripides was recognised in the ancient world as well: Satyrus (P. Oxy. 1176, fr. 39, col. 7) and Quintilian *Inst.* 10.1.69. Notable modern scholarship on the topic includes Katsouris (1975); Arnott (1986); Goldberg (1993); Nesselrath (1993); Gutzwiller (2000); Cusset (2003); Martina (2016) 3.11–266. For sound, if dated, assessment of the *problem* of Menander's Euripidean influence, see Duckworth (1952) 333–8.

[7] Seidensticker (1978) 307–10 and 316–18 explores the idea, in relation both to *Macbeth* and to the *Bacchae*.

[8] As argued, convincingly, by Sommerstein (2002) for 'comic' elements in the *Oristeia*'s language.

covert, occurring at the level of structure, theme, convention and dramaturgy, rather than direct quotation or scenic imitation, which poses a distinct challenge for anyone wishing to argue for its influence. The general lack of scholarly studies may be attributed, in part, to the shadowiness of comedy's effect on tragedy: only a handful of Hellenists have broached the issue,[9] while Latinists are further hampered by the patchier nature of their evidence.[10] Investigative methods are also a limiting factor because in order to appreciate the full extent of comedy's influence, we need to look beyond direct parallels and specific allusions. What Robert Miola says of Shakespeare's debt to classical comedy applies equally well in this instance: we must "broaden our conception of influence to include various manifestations, verbal and also non-verbal—'transformed convention, rhetorical or structural format, scenic rhythm, ideational or imagistic concatenation, thematic articulation.'"[11] Only through a combination of these elements, and through assessing comedy's presence at a bedrock level, can its effect on tragedy be fully understood. The present study of Plautus in Seneca takes its cue from Miola's directives and argues that 'comedy' elements in the play make their presence felt through a cumulation of thematic and dramaturgical components recognizable as belonging to the *palliata* tradition. What matters is the overall

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[9] Most prominently: Herington (1963); Seidensticker (1982); Gregory (2000); Sommerstein (2002); Jendza (2020).

[10] Lund (2023) is the only extensive study. Meltzer (1988) 314–15, Grant (1999) and Bexley (2022) 59, 95–96, and 314–15 all hint at Senecan tragedy's use of *palliata* material. In a related vein, Tarrant (1978) charts the post-classical dramatic features of Senecan drama "for which the earliest surviving evidence is in New Comedy", but he stops short of ascribing them a direct comic origin.

[11] Miola (1994) 14, including a citation of Miola (1992) 8. A useful example of how critics may go about detecting comedy's influence on tragedy is Scafuro (2014), an excellent and convincing discussion of *comoedia palliata* elements in *Titus Andronicus*.

impression they create; the *Thyestes*' 'Plautine' quality derives from their summative effect, just as it depends upon their diffuse and oblique nature.

The second outcome is to show how this generic mix informs Atreus's most distinctive characteristics, making him the model of the tragic villain-hero that enjoys such a long afterlife in Renaissance drama. Atreus's mental acuity and playfulness, alongside his theatricalized command of the play's events, are traits he inherits from the Plautine *seruus callidus*, and that endow him, in a tragic context, with a certain dark charm. His ability to galvanize the audience and other characters in the tragedy is largely a product of his comic background, which invites allegiance and appreciation despite the horrific acts he pursues. Further, the dramatic appeal of the tragic villain as comic hero was later recognized and exploited by Shakespeare, whose Hamlet and Iago embody not just the tragic elements of Seneca's Atreus, but the Plautine ones as well. Both are distant descendants of the *Thyestes*' generic coupling, their own Plautine-Senecan mix suggesting strongly that Shakespeare understood – on some level – Atreus's similarity to the *seruus callidus*. Admittedly, Hamlet and Iago differ in their performance of these characteristics, but their shared genealogy confirms the distinctiveness of Atreus's dramatic power and explains how comedy forms a core aspect of his enduring appeal.

Hierarchies of Wit

In Erich Segal's classic formulation, Plautine comedy constructs "a new – albeit temporary – aristocracy, in which wit, not birth, distinguishes the ruler from the ruled."[12] The plays' inverted

[12] Segal (1987) 104. See also Richlin (2017) 203–51 on the key Plautine theme of slaves outwitting their owners.

status dynamic grants prominence to Plautus's signature character, the *seruus callidus*,[13] who assumes authority via brains alone. In direct contrast to his lowly social position, the Plautine slave is a master of words and ideas.[14] He outwits respectable, or wealthy, or simply *free* members of society, subordinating them to his superior intelligence and attaining – momentarily and figuratively – a status surpassing theirs. Power in these plays is neither achieved nor exercised through physical oppression, as shown by the masters' ineffectual threats of beating and mill work; rather, it is the preserve of wiliness, wielded by those who can think on their feet and spin a convincing story. As Tranio declares in the *Mostellaria*, "there's not a feather weight of difference whether the patron or client is cleverer" (*pluma haud interest, patronus an cliens probior siet, Mostell.* 407–8). What matters is nous, not the socially conferred prestige of money or rank.

The social inferiority of the Plautine comic hero might make him seem an improbable model for Seneca's Atreus, a powerful tyrant and aristocrat by birth, but the fit is actually very close, because Atreus manipulates others chiefly via intelligence, not force. He stands out among the rogues' gallery of Senecan protagonists for maintaining his dominance through wit. Like the Plautine trickster-slave, he can laugh at situations other people take seriously, which implies not

[13] Notwithstanding the valid caveats of Duckworth (1952) 250, the *seruus callidus* is rightfully regarded as Plautus's most distinctive character. See Fraenkel (2007) 165–72 and Stace (1968) for Plautus's expansion of the slave role from earlier comedy, and Segal (1987) 104–36 on the clever slave's antics as the "primary theme" in Plautus's work. On the possible importance of the slave role in Naevius and Caecilius, see Wright (1974) 105–6; Gratwick (1982) 106–7; Manuwald (2011) 197. Harsh (1955) presents a valiant but unconvincing argument for the presence of 'clever slave' types in Greek comedy as well.

[14] Gunderson (2015) 58–59: "The 'fact' of the slave's actual enslavement stands in an ironic relationship to the liberated and imperialistic quality of the slave's own discourse."

just a substantial degree of intellectual detachment, but an ability to 'play' with and therefore take charge of the circumstances that surround him. Amy Richlin notes the Plautine slave's tendency to dismiss freeborn interlocutors as 'stupid'.[15] Their dullness is often a direct correlation of the slave's linguistic dexterity, as, for example, in the *Pseudolus*'s opening exchange between Pseudolus and Calidorus, in which the latter bewails the imminent sale of his beloved courtesan, while the former cracks jokes at the young man's expense: the courtesan's letter looks as though a chicken wrote it (*Pseud*. 29–30); repaying a wooden letter with silver coins is a bad deal (*Pseud.* 47–48); the letter's content cannot move him to tears because his eyes are like pumice stones (*Pseud.* 75–76). Pseudolus accompanies Calidorus's self-pity with repeated cries of *eheu!* (*Pseud.* 79–84). Although Calidorus, too, claims some witty lines in this exchange (e.g. 14–15; 32; 46), they are always trumped by Pseudolus, with the result that Calidorus seems the less intelligent of the two. Pseudolus's acuity accentuates the young man's helpless sentimentality and encourages the audience to laugh at his expense.

An equivalent, if darker, version of linguistic playfulness occurs in the *Thyestes*' final Act, where Atreus, triumphant in his revenge, toys with Thyestes' ignorance by alluding to the latter's cannibalism through a string of cheeky double meanings: "no part of your offspring will be taken from you" (*nulla pars prolis tuae / sibi subtrahentur*, *Thy.* 977–78); "take this cup of our bloodline" (*poculum … cape / gentile*, *Thy.* 982–83);[16] "no day will ever take them [i.e. your sons] from you" (*tibi illos nullus eripiet dies*, *Thy.* 998); "whatever is left over from your children, you have, and whatever is not left over" (*quidquid e natis tuis / superest habes,*

[15] Richlin (2017) 213–14.

[16] For *Thy.* 982–83, I use the translation of Fitch (2018) because it captures the insidious sense of *gentile*.

quodcumque non superest habes. *Thy*. 1030–31).[17] The focus of this exchange is not so much tragic revelation and the reversal of fortune as a celebration of Atreus's wit and concomitant ridicule of Thyestes' cerebral slowness. A celebratory attitude may be expected of the successful avenger, but Atreus goes further in taking the opportunity to poke fun at his victim. Humiliation of the defeated party is the primary aim, just as, in the *Pseudolus*, Simo complains about the trickster-slave not only taking his money, but laughing at him as well (*satin ultro et argentum aufert et me irridet? Pseud.* 1316). And in laughing at the situation – and inviting the external audience to laugh alongside him – Atreus demonstrates an abstract enjoyment of Thyestes' suffering, as a canvas on which to display his intellectual superiority. This is the attitude of a *seruus callidus* transferred to a tragic milieu.

A subcategory of this linguistic cleverness is propensity for wordplay, which Atreus also shares with the Plautine *seruus callidus*. Double meanings enact at the verbal level what double crossing does at the level of the play's plot; Atreus joins the clever slave in comprehending and exploiting the deceptive properties of language. He can see multiple uses and meanings implicit in a single word, whereas his victim, like the dupes of Plautine comedy, typically sees only one.[18] He is even willing to make himself the subject of wordplay, such as when he puns on his own name in his opening monologue: *iratus Atreus* (*Thy.* 180). Not only are the words near-anagrams,

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[17] Goldberg (1996) 279–83 is a perceptive assessment of Atreus's verbal domination in Act 5. Atrean wordplay has been examined by Meltzer (1988) and Schiesaro (2003) 111–12. The extended form of Atreus's joking in this Act – he keeps it up for over 50 lines! – may also owe a debt to the 'running' or 'elastic gag' commonly found in Plautus, which involves one character, usually the trickster-slave, producing multiple variations on the theme of a single joke: see Schironi (2014) 456, and Marshall (2006) 272–73.

[18] See 20–21, below, for fuller exploration of this idea.

but the adjective evokes Atreus's essential quality, anger, to the extent that it could be seen as an etymology for his name.[19] While such verbal playfulness is not confined to comedy – Sophocles' Oedipus, for instance, puns (unknowingly?) on his own name[20] – its presence in Seneca's *Thyestes* belongs to a wider matrix of Plautine elements. Atreus's linguistic dexterity in this respect resembles that of Chrysalus in the *Bacchides*, who likewise plays with the meaning of his name as a way of spurring himself to further action: "Goldenboy needs gold" (*opus est chryso Chrysalo, Bacch.* 240); "he [i.e. the master, Nicobulus] will change me from Chrysalus to Crossalus" (*faciet...Crucisalum me ex Chrysalo, Bacch.* 362). Both in Atreus's case and Chrysalus's, this punning is representative of a broader talent for manipulation, whether of words, events, or other people. Further, Atreus's *double entendres* tend to jar with his tragic context, so much so that in Act 5 they threaten to disrupt it, a dissonance that similarly suggests their derivation from comedy.

Wittiness is a distinctive property of Seneca's Atreus. No other Senecan protagonist claims this characteristic: Oedipus tends to be on the back foot in his exchanges; Phaedra is not that sharp; Medea, who comes closest in her verbal power, is not given to joking. The traits that set Atreus apart from other Senecan characters are those that are the most Plautine. He treats conversation as a competition in which he outstrips his interlocutors and dazzles his audience. He exercises his wit on everyone, regardless of their role. Act 2 of the *Thyestes* sees Atreus demolishing his minister's cautious advice in a way that exposes its platitudinous nature. When the minister avers that rulers should seek true praise from their subjects, praise that comes from the heart, not the tongue (*Thy.* 207–10), Atreus counters, "true praise often happens even to a

[19] Fitch and McElduff (2002) 25n22; Stevens (2002) 149.

[20] See Goldhill (1986) 216–19 and Segal (1993) 56.

lowly man, false praise only to the powerful" (*laus uera et humili saepe contingit uiro, / non nisi potenti falsa, Thy.* 211–12). The response implies the tyrant's capacity for violent coercion, which in turn belies the true basis of Atreus's own power: cleverness. The kind of cleverness that comprehends the brutalities of *realpolitik* and their necessary encapsulation in powerful rhetoric.

Hence, while status does not have the same urgency or thematic significance in Seneca's *Thyestes* as it does in Plautine comedy, there is nonetheless a plausible case for viewing Atreus as a counterpart to the *seruus callidus*. Both are masters of language, and both enact their mastery *through* language,[21] despite manifest differences in their actual styles of speech (with Atreus's terseness occupying the opposite end of the spectrum from the Plautine slave's multisyllabic verbosity). Further, both enjoy plotting for its own sake, as a means of indulging their intelligence. What Donald Frame says of Molière's Scapin, that he is "a virtuoso in love with his virtuosity",[22] is a fitting label not only for the *seruus callidus* (on which Scapin is based),[23] but also for Seneca's Atreus, who likewise derives his chief enjoyment from exercising his native wit. While both Atreus and the clever slave pursue their intrigues for a purpose, their activity rapidly becomes an end in itself, as both derive enjoyment and satisfaction from manipulating others.[24] Atreus aspires to "make a masterpiece of his revenge",[25] and although his

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[21] Atreus's linguistic prowess has been noted by Schiesaro (2003) 11–12, 121–22 and 133, and Davis (2003) 59–61.

[22] Frame (1968) 297.

[23] The immediate source of Molière's Scapin is Terence's Phormio, himself a trickster figure (albeit in the role of parasite, not slave). Yet Plautus's influence is also discernible throughout the play, and Scapin sometimes resembles Chrysalus from the *Bacchides*: see Duckworth (1952) 407–8.

[24] Thus Lefèvre (1988), on Plautine *serui callidi*: "Ihre Intrigen sind nicht einem höheren Ziel untergeordnet, sondern verselbständigen sich. Sie betrügen die alten Herrern aus Neigung."

[25] Burnett (1998) 13.

activity has a more immediate motive than that of the *seruus callidus* (because Atreus seeks to rectify his own problems, not somebody else's), nonetheless it becomes an end in itself, as he imagines its ideal form even in retrospect: *ex uulnere ipso sanguinem calidum in tua / defundere ora debui, ut uiuentium / biberes cruorem—uerba sunt irae data / dum propero* ("I should have poured hot blood straight from the wound into your mouth, so you could drink their lifeblood while they were alive – in rushing, I cheated my anger" *Thy.* 1054–57). These lines, delivered *after* Thyestes' act of cannibalism and Atreus's subsequent revelation of the truth, show the protagonist fixated upon the crime's *method* rather than its *outcome*. That Atreus has achieved payback, one way or another, appears to hold less weight for him than the *form* of that payback. Like the *seruus callidus*, Atreus delights in the details qua details, as opposed to their ultimate purpose.

Atreus's vocabulary at *Thyestes* 1056–57 likewise suggests a parallel with the *seruus callidus*, because *uerba dare* does not belong to the tragic register but is a standard phrase in Roman comedy,[26] where it combines themes of deceit with linguistic prowess: to trick someone is to trick them *verbally*. Here Atreus redeploys the phrase to designate the arch-intriguer's self-deception rather than his deception of others, but the point still stands: his capacity for deceit is grounded in words. It is through verbal means that Atreus has enticed Thyestes back to Argos and convinced him to share the crown, and although his revenge takes the indisputably physical form of murder, it is consummated in rhetorical display, further indicating Atreus's raw delight in

[26] Tarrant (1985) 236 notes that the phrase is generally avoided in high poetry. On *uerba dare* as a Plautine theme, see Gunderson (2015) 55–79.

his own intelligence.[27] The Plautine slave and Senecan tyrant may occupy vastly different social positions, but their essential characteristics are remarkably similar.

As a postscript to this section, it is also worth noting the motifs of status inversion that occur more globally, throughout the *Thyestes*' plot. As a tyrant who behaves like a *seruus callidus*, Atreus embodies the 'topsy-turvy' aesthetic of Plautine *palliata*, as well as evincing its most prominent polarity of master and slave. Tantalus likewise evokes this Saturnalian ethos in his moving from a position of powerless constraint to temporary reinstatement as the head of the household, a status he maintains only for the duration of the play and under the ultimate command of the Fury, who represents a superior authority. This situation corresponds in some measure to that of the clever slave, whose ascendancy is assumed to be short-lived and often dependent upon his masters' indulgence. That Tantalus is released from his underworld prison to enjoy a *liberum diem* as a guest at a feast (*Thy.* 63–64) further suggests his resemblance to the *seruus callidus* through its evocation of the Saturnalian license that underpins Plautine plots.[28]

Patterns of inversion feature in Act 3, as well, where Thyestes effectively cedes authority to his sons by remarking that he will follow rather than lead them into Argos (*ego uos sequor, non duco, Thy.* 489). Besides echoing the imagery of *Thyestes* 100, where Tantalus submits to the Fury, this line also conjures the hierarchical exchanges of Plautine comedy, where those of

[27] Goldberg (1996) 283 makes a similar point: "Though the exercise of real power was what enabled Atreus to punish his brother by killing his children, it was rhetorical power that granted his true wish, which was to watch Thyestes become wretched in consequence of that act."

[28] Segal (1987) and Lefèvre (1988) both regard the Saturnalia as a cultural reference point and likely model for the role inversion portrayed in Plautine comedy. Lund (2023) 174–75 detects in the Fury's command at *Thy.* 83 – *ante perturba domum* – a further association between Tantalus and the *seruus callidus*: both "make a mess" of the household as a corollary of generating the play's plot.

superior authority or social standing are made to follow their inferiors. Thus, the *senex* Simo complies with the demands of his *seruus*, Pseudolus: "lead me wherever you wish" (*duc me quo uis, Pseud.* 1328); "I follow you" (*te sequor*, *Pseud.* 1331). In similar fashion, the *senes* at the end of the *Bacchides* express obedience by following the courtesans' lead (*ducite nos quo lubet*, *Bacch.* 1205), while earlier in the same play, Pistoclerus inverts that usual arrangement of a pupil walking behind his tutor by commanding Lydus, his paedogogus, "be quiet and follow me" (*sequere hac me et tacere*, *Bacch.* 169). These mainstays of Plautine comedy, young men eluding the control of the *paterfamilias* and *senes* capitulating to individuals of lesser status, may find a distant echo in Thyestes allowing his sons to take the lead.

In this context of inversion and suspended social norms, it is not hard to see that "wit…distinguishes the ruler from the ruled"[29] in *Thyestes* as well as in Plautine comedy. Atreus dominates through intelligence, and although the play's other relationships of subordination also involve linguistic superiority, no character can match the protagonist's skill. The Fury assails Tantalus with threats but must eventually resort to using her whip (*Thy.* 96); the messenger enthralls the chorus, but his expressions of sadistic pleasure are modelled on Atreus's own.[30] Atreus alone occupies the apex; intelligence, like the kingdom of Argos, has no room for two.

Duping Thyestes

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[29] Segal (1987) 104.

[30] First noted by Tarrant (1985) 180, the messenger's development of an Atrean viewpoint and "flair for the ironic retort" is explored more fully by Littlewood (2004) 226–40.

Every deceiver needs a dupe, and Thyestes in Seneca's tragedy often plays the *senex* to Atreus's *seruus*. He is a lapsed moralist whose supposedly stern scruples crumble at the first hint of luxury,[31] and although he often professes reluctance, he ends up participating in the feast against his better judgement. His character's arc from righteousness to dissolution, withdrawal to partygoing, recalls in some measure the Plautine *senes*, like Nicobulus in *Bacchides* and Simo in *Pseudolus*, whose strictness is lessened to the point of their joining the festivities that conclude the play's plot. These broad similarities are bolstered by closer connections as well, for Thyestes' willingness to trust Atreus even as he suspects him, and his becoming an unwitting actor in Atreus's plot are factors reminiscent of a Plautine *senex-seruus* dynamic. In turn, Atreus resembles the Plautine *seruus callidus* in assuming the role of playwright/performer and inviting belief via his command of the theatrical illusion.

Thyestes' submission to Atreus is one of the tragedy's paradoxes, since it is clear from his first appearance that he does not trust his brother. He openly declares his suspicion of trickery and his steadfast desire to resist, only to fall victim at the first opportunity. Upon entry, he urges himself to return to the woods, far from the dangers of Argos (*Thy.* 412–14; 427–28); he admits feeling fear (*Thy.* 434–35) and classes his brother alongside kingship as a *res incertissima* (*Thy*. 424–25); he is broadly aware of deception lurking underneath the promise of wealth and power (*Thy.* 446–53); he doubts the genuineness of Atreus's fraternal affection (*Thy.* 476–82) and he states outright that Atreus poses a threat to his sons (*uos facitis mihi / Atrea timendum*, "you make Atreus a source of fear for me", *Thy.* 485–86).[32] When his son, Tantalus, urges him to

[31] The failed moralist is a character with a long comic and satiric pedigree. On the likely evocation of satire in Thyestes' moralising at 446–70, see Coffey (1996) 86 and Cowan (2017) 103–5.

[32] Scolari (2021) 437 remarks the significance of Thyestes' presentiment.

accept Atreus's invitation of co-rulership, Thyestes replies "a kingdom does not have room for two" (*non capit regnum duos*, *Thy.* 444). But when Atreus reworks this phrase into *recipit hoc regnum duos* ("this kingdom has room for two" *Thy.* 534), Thyestes eventually agrees – *accipio* ("I accept", *Thy.* 542; the Latin evinces strong lexical links) – despite having affirmed just two lines earlier his "definite plan to refuse the throne" (*respuere certum est regna consilium mihi*, *Thy.* 540). Why, if he senses so much danger, does he comply so rapidly and completely with Atreus's offer?

The usual explanation is that Thyestes secretly covets wealth and power, and that Atreus comprehends and exploits this weakness.[33] Thyestes' marveling at "Argive wealth" (*Argolicas opes, Thy.* 404), his desire to shrug off the "grim poverty" of exile (*tristis egestas*, *Thy.* 924), and his ambiguous claim to consider Atreus's possessions his own (*meum esse credo quidquid est, frater, tuum, Thy.* 535) all indicate the explanation's validity: Thyestes' resistance is a veneer and Atreus is right in thinking that his brother "aspires to [his] kingdom" (*regna nunc sperat mea*, *Thy.* 290). But there is another factor at play in Thyestes' capitulation: the model of the Plautine dupe who trusts the *seruus callidus* even when he knows he shouldn't. Like Thyestes, these dupes often assert their presentiment of and resistance to intended acts of deception, but fall victim anyway, entrapped by the *seruus callidus'* successful deployment of psychological insight and verbal fabrication.

Nicobulus in the *Bacchides* is an excellent example. Inherently suspicious of his slave, Chrysalus, Nicobulus winds up being tricked both in spite and because of his suspicion.

[33] Thyestes' subconscious appetite for wealth/power, as expressed especially in Act 3, has been noted by Tarrant (1985) 149; Boyle (1997) 24 and (2017) 249–68; Davis (2003) 46-47. Schiesaro (2003) 105–11 argues that psychological insight is a major factor in Atreus's successful manipulation of his brother.

Chrysalus targets and triumphs over precisely the person who seems, on the surface, most resistant to his scheming: he has Mnesilochus, Nicobulus's son, write a letter to his father warning him of Chrysalus's schemes and instructing him to keep the slave tied up at home (*Bacch.* 729–47). Nicobulus quickly complies (*Bacch.* 799–824), but the irony is that Nicobulus's act of distrust leads him right into Chrysalus's trap, because in refusing to believe the slave, he actually credits the entire content of Chrysalus's letter; even his suspicion becomes, at base, a gesture of trust! He then proceeds to compound this gullibility by accepting Chrysalus's subsequent claims about Mnesilochus (*Bac.* 830–71). This is a supreme example of the *seruus callidus* inducing people to believe and do what seems impossible. Nicobulus declares that his slave "will never take the gold" from him (*numquam auferes hinc aurum*, *Bac.* 824), but Chrysalus counters with the seemingly unbelievable assurance that this will happen:

Chrys: At qui iam dabis.

Nic: Dabo? **Chrys**: Atque orabis me quidem ultro ut auferam,
cum illum rescisces criminatorem meum
quanto in periclo et quanta in pernicie siet.

Chrys: But you will give it.

Nic: Will I? **Chrys:** And what's more, you will beg me to take it,
when you get to know the danger that accuser of mine is in
and the ruin facing him.

(*Bacch.* 824–27)

We could say that things turn out exactly as Chrysalus predicts, but there really is no prediction involved, because Chrysalus engineers Nicobulus's actions and controls them all the way

through. In this regard, the future tense at 824 (*dabis*) acquires an almost oracular quality: Nicobulus *will* hand over the money because Chrysalus *will* ensure he does so. This is guaranteed to happen; it is not simply a possibility. The scene encapsulates in miniature the demiurgic power of the Plautine trickster whose success lies in inducing others to believe and do what they do not want to.

Simo in the *Pseudolus* suffers a comparable fate. He warns Pseudolus that the slave will not be able to get any money from him – or, indeed, from anywhere – because he has become aware in advance of the slave's plans to rescue his son's beloved courtesan (*Pseud.* 504–6), but Pseudolus counters that Simo will hand over the money anyway, despite his anticipation of trickery (*Pseud.* 507–11).[34] The *seruus callidus* then proceeds to lay a bet with the *senex* and hey presto! Simo has assented to the competition (*Pseud.* 546) when just a few lines before he had denied the possibility of ever handing over any cash. Like Chrysalus's *dabis* at *Bacchides* 824, Pseudolus's use of the verb (*dabis* at *Pseud.* 508 and 511), functions as an absolute assurance of future events, the old man's payment having been guaranteed by the slave's supreme ability to invite belief even when he appears at his most untrustworthy.[35]

Although dynamics of trust and belief in the *Thyestes* are less complex than in Plautus, it is still the case that Atreus manipulates his brother in much the same way that the *seruus callidus* dupes the *senex*. The victim in all instances repeatedly expresses his consciousness of the trickster's potential guile, knowledge of which comes from previous experience of the pair's antagonistic relationship. In both *Thyestes* and Plautus, such knowledge also acquires a

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[34] On the *Pseudolus's* complex themes of trust and belief, see Feeney (2010) and Sharrock (1996) 160–61.

[35] Feeney (2010) 288–90 notes the paradox that Pseudolus seems more believable the more he assures the audience of his untrustworthiness. See also Sharrock (1996) 163.

metatheatrical quality, as acknowledgement of the character type and of the audience expectations accompanying the role: this is how the *seruus callidus* usually behaves, and in Atreus's case, this is what we expect given previous iterations of the myth/tragedy.[36] The victim's knowledge of his opponent translates, at an extra-dramatic level, into the audience's broad knowledge of the genre and storyline.

More specifically, Atreus echoes the clever slave in catering to Thyestes' greed. This follows the pattern of Plautine *palliata* where *senes* and other blocking characters such as pimps are typically undone by their pursuit of, or interest in, money.[37] The method of entrapment, moreover, demonstrates Atreus's keen understanding of what makes Thyestes tick. Just as Chrysalus in the *Bacchides* understands how Nicobulus will behave when angry and provokes the old man's anger on purpose, to manipulate him better (*Bacch.* 763; 772),[38] so Atreus foresees that Thyestes' greed will override his mistrust: *credula est spes improba* ("unprincipled hope is credulous" *Thy.* 295). Given these correspondences, it is tempting to see in Atreus's assurance of Thyestes' arrival (*fratrem uidebit* "he will see his brother" *Thy.* 292) a reflection of Chrysalus's and Pseudolus's quasi-oracular *dabis*: this is going to happen because Atreus will make it

[36] Characters' self-conscious, metatheatrical knowledge of their own and each other's roles is a mainstay of scholarship on Seneca tragedy; see especially Boyle (1997) 112–37; Fitch and McElduff (2002); Bexley (2022) 23–98. Metatheatrical acknowledgement of roles is equally prevalent in Plautus, e.g. *Amph.* 265–69; *Asin.* 174–75; *Pseud.* 1081–83, though it has not received as much study.

[37] Segal (1987) 70–98 discusses how concern for money motivates the Plautine agelast. The concept of the 'blocking' character and its fundamental role in *comoedia palliata* originates with Frye (1957) 164–68.

[38] Slater (2000) 12.

happen.[39] The event is assured both through Atreus's psychological hold over his victim and through his metacompositional control of the plot. *Thyestes* joins Plautine comedy in celebrating the trickster's demiurgic powers, his capacity to win compliance via nothing more than a mirage.

As in Plautus, too, this mirage is fabricated chiefly from words, and Thyestes demonstrates exceptional readiness to accept their surface and/or conventional meaning. He never once questions Atreus's overtures of reconciliation, despite their multiple, sinister undertones.[40] He is likewise incapable of detecting subtexts in Atreus's ominous promise to "give the gods their designated offerings" (*ego destinatas uictimas superis dabo*, *Thy.* 545) and in the sequence of grisly jokes Atreus utters in the play's closing scene (*Thy.* 976–1031). The cleverness of this final exchange rests in Atreus employing the literal meaning of phrases more typically understood as figurative. Hence, his promise to present Thyestes with the "longed-for faces" of his sons (*ora quae exoptas dabo*, *Thy.* 978) is used literally – he has kept the heads! – rather than in its accepted sense of synecdoche for the person.[41] This is a neat twist on Seneca's part, because gullibility is usually characterized by literal-mindedness, by, in Erik Gunderson's words, a tendency to "think a thing is what someone says it is."[42] But Thyestes' weakness lies

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[39] In fact, this single example belongs to a broader paradigm, for behind Atreus's guarantee lies the Fury's prediction of the plot's events in Act 1 (esp. 25–41). Atreus will ensure Thyestes' return and subsequent downfall in part because the Fury has already set events in motion, her relentless subjunctives materialising into his assured use of the future tense. Here, again, we see the play's mixed genre in action, as the Fury's development of a tragic plot is taken over by Atreus in the guise of the *seruus callidus*.

[40] Explored by Bexley (2022) 78–80.

[41] Tarrant (1985) 226.

[42] Gunderson (2015) 58.

precisely in his *not* being able to take these statements at face value. As is the case for Plautus's *senes*, his suspicion never translates into an awareness of subtexts and double meanings.

Concomitant to Thyestes' bumbling witlessness are Atreus's virtuoso roles as actor and playwright/director, both of which align him closely with the Plautine *seruus callidus*. Act 3 sees him assume a forgiving persona as part of his strategy to put Thyestes at ease. As Thyestes approaches, Atreus delivers a lengthy aside confessing his sense of outrage and his struggle to suppress it in favor of friendly sentiments (*Thy.* 491–507). He then exhorts himself to a demonstration of good will: *praestetur fides* (*Thy.* 507), an ambiguous phrase meaning both 'let me fulfil my promise' and 'let me put on a display of trustworthiness'.[43] This remark, combined with the aside's conspiratorial quality, prefaces Atreus's ensuing speech as a kind of performance (*OLD* s.v. *praestare* 6c), one that Thyestes will misconstrue as genuine. Atreus embraces his brother (508–9), assures him that anger has passed (509–10), and calls for the reinstatement of *pietas* and family ties (510–11). Thyestes is convinced by this display of sincerity, and his willingness to accept Atreus's illusion may recall a stock scene from Plautine *palliata*, in which dupes occupy the position of naïve audience members persuaded by a performance witnessed in real dramatic time and orchestrated by the *seruus callidus*. Ballio is taken in by Simia's role-play (*Pseud.* 956–1016); Sceledrus by Philocomasium and Periplectomenus (*Mil.* 411–585); Pyrgopolinices by Acroteleutium, Milphidippa, Philocomasium, and Pleusicles (*Mil.* 994–1093; 1200–1377); and Dordalus by Saturio's daughter (*Pers.* 549–723). In every instance, Plautus configures the relationship between deceiver and deceived as a power dynamic between

[43] The line's dual meaning is carefully disentangled by Tarrant (1985) 164 and Schiesaro (2003) 55.

performer and audience, where the former strives to gain mastery over the latter.[44] Further, by having such performances occupy real dramatic time (as opposed to their happening offstage or being reported in a messenger's speech), Plautus creates a tension between the external audience's superior knowledge and the internal audience's (relative) ignorance, a gap he enhances through creative use of asides, just as Seneca has Atreus gain the audience's complicity prior to his deceptive enactment of reconciliation. Seneca also follows Plautus in equating the victim's gullibility with a simplistic reception of a dramatic act: belief in lies and belief in theatrical performance merge together. Atreus and the Plautine *seruus callidus* both create and control performances as a way of inducing others to believe them.

Even more than being audience members, though, the dupes of Plautine comedy become unwitting actors in scripts written by the *seruus callidus*. Ballio, in *Pseudolus*, complies with Pseudolus's plot by handing his courtesan to Simia; Pyrgopolinices, in *Miles Gloriosus*, follows Palaestrio's script by falling in love with Acroteleutium; Periphanes, in *Epidicus*, accepts his slave's lies to the ludicrous extent of acting as father to a girl who is not his daughter. While the technique is not confined to Plautus – Euripides uses it to great effect in the *Bacchae* – it is an overwhelmingly common trope in Plautine *palliata*, where it enables plots of deceit to function

[44] In fact, the actor-audience relationship in Plautus is more complex than space or relevance permits me to explain in the body of this article, but it is worth flagging briefly here. Although Plautine tricksters endeavour to 'deceive' and therefore dominate their internal audience, their power is ultimately contingent upon the audience's willing submission to the dramatic illusion; if the audience resists, the performance fails. This balance of power *within* the play reflects – because it is modelled on – the external actor-audience relationship, in which the performer is socially as well as theatrically subordinate to the spectators, and this dependence is illustrated via the character's/actor's repeated exhortation for a favourable reception. The *seruus callidus*'s desire to gain mastery over an audience functions as acknowledgement of his compromised social autonomy, to which theatre offers only a partial, momentary solution.

as metaphors for the play itself.[45] Manipulation in these contexts is likened to a playwright's control over characters and a director's over actors; the *seruus callidus*'s plotting unites 'intrigue' with 'dramatic composition'.[46]

Interaction between Atreus and Thyestes follows an equivalent pattern, in which the victim unknowingly assumes a role devised by his opponent. When the brothers meet in Act 3, Atreus urges Thyestes to exchange his rags for royal robes: *squalidam uestem exue … / et ornatus cape / pares meis* ("take off your dirty clothing and put on richly adorned garments like my own" *Thy.* 524–26). As a prelude to misfortune, this costume change signals Thyestes' entrance into the genre of tragedy, where kings, heroes and gods predominate, marked out by their elaborate outfits. Often employed in the technical sense of removing a theatrical costume, *exue* lends a metatheatrical quality to Atreus's words, as though he were a playwright/director instructing an actor. The metaphor continues throughout the brothers' exchange, with Thyestes telling Atreus, *lacrimis agendum est: supplicem primus uides* ("I must plead my case / act with tears: you are the first to see me beg" *Thy.* 517), a declaration that evokes a theatrical framework in which Atreus plays witness to Thyestes' display of emotion.[47] Metatheatrical connotations resurface towards the scene's end, too, when Atreus remarks that he will withdraw his own claim to the throne if Thyestes does not agree to share it: *meam relinquam nisi tuam partem accipis* (*Thy.* 541). In skillfully ambiguous phrasing, Atreus conveys both the idea of a 'share' in

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[45] Sharrock (2009) 4.

[46] Fitzgerald (2000) 44 notes that the *seruus callidus* is responsible for "both the scheme *in* the play and the dramatic shape *of* the play."

[47] Boyle (2017) 282: "the legal use of *agere*…seems here to combine with intimations of 'acting', 'performing'".

government and a 'role' played by each of the participants;[48] Thyestes must accept his for the tragic charade to continue. And continue it does, with Thyestes' unwitting and painful participation in Act 5's prolonged recognition scene.

This dynamic of director and actor exhibits undeniable tragicomic qualities, as Atreus jokingly clothes Thyestes' for his doom. Atreus's distinctiveness in this scene comes from his embodying an archetypally comic role in a tragic context and applying the trickster's light-hearted skill to the heavy material of violent revenge. Such novel effects become more apparent when the Atreus-Thyestes exchange in Act 3 is measured against the similar contest between Tantalus and the Fury in Act 1. There, the Fury likewise occupies a quasi-directorial role, instructing Tantalus on his part in the ensuing drama and compelling him to play it. But the atmosphere in Act 1 is more fully tragic: the Fury, unlike Atreus, is neither playful nor witty, and she achieves obedience through physical coercion and threats, rather than subtle manipulation. The two scenes reflect one another, with variations. As much as Atreus recapitulates the Fury's metacompositional control, he does so in a lighter key, his directorial role indicating not just mastery but irreverent playfulness, an enjoyment of his vengeance as though it were a game.

As I intimated above, this theatricalization of Atreus's deceit need not be exclusively Plautine. Dionysus in Euripides' *Bacchae* is also a likely model: he assumes the role of playwright/director with Pentheus an unwitting actor in his script. He even dresses his victim as a prelude to and preparation for tragic undoing. Alessandro Schiesaro argues for a strong link between Seneca's Atreus and Euripides' Dionysus: each is "a consummate manipulator of words, knowledge, and emotions"; each plays "a crucial metadramatic role", enticing his victim through

[48] Boyle (2017) 289 remarks that *pars* can signify a theatrical part even in the singular, and gives the comparandum of Sen. *Prov.* 2.12.

the power of theatrical illusion; each "import[s] into the tragedy comic elements which not only enrich their expressive repertoire, but also prove invaluable in the battle against less articulate opponents".[49] The hypothesis has weight, and there is no reason to discount Euripides' influence on Seneca's *Thyestes*; it is another element in the play's complex generic mix. But given the play's multifaceted engagement with Plautus, it is both profitable and plausible to take Atreus's metatheatrical manipulation of his opponent, and Thyestes' theatricalized entrapment in the 'plot', as evidence of Atreus's link to the *seruus callidus* as well as to Dionysus. In any case, as Schiesaro observes, Euripides' Dionysus himself embodies a generic mix of tragedy and comedy, a mix that Seneca's Atreus repurposes with material from Plautus.

The presence of these comedy elements has a substantial effect at the global level of Seneca's tragedy. I have noted already how Atreus's wittiness makes him not just a tragic villain, but a villain-hero whose efforts command a certain degree of audience allegiance even at their most criminal. Concomitantly, Thyestes' role as a Plautine dupe introduces an atmosphere of discomfort into the tragedy, his obtuseness inviting an odd mixture of pity and contempt.[50] Unlike Euripides' Pentheus, who falls victim to a similar opponent, Thyestes never displays on stage any of the aggressive vanity Atreus credits him with, which makes him seem both less deserving of his fate and more pathetically vulnerable to Atreus's machinations. His occasional resemblance to a Plautine *senex* illuminates his activity as a 'blocking' figure whose resistance must be overcome: he professes reluctance to emerge from exile, reluctance to accept Atreus's offer of shared rulership, and his eventual acquiescence suggests an underlying desire for

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[49] Schiesaro (2003) 133–34.

[50] Cowan (2017) 111 argues more broadly that the comic/satiric aspects of Senecan tragedy result in "jarring dissonances of tone".

licentiousness, just as the Plautine *senex* acknowledges – or is reminded of – his own youthful indulgences, and often ends up joining the play's saturnalian revelry. Comedy's movement towards happy resolution, where families – especially parents and children – are reunited and issues of legitimacy settled, finds a warped reflection in the *Thyestes*' grisly finale where Atreus resolves his doubts about parentage; the brothers are reunited at a feast; and Atreus 'returns' Thyestes' children to their rightful father.[51] Once again, Thyestes' role recalls that of the *senex* from *palliata*, who is granted at the play's end the opportunity of re-establishing relationships with his children, except that in Thyestes' case those relationships are both closer and more terminal than anything depicted on the comic stage. For Atreus, this is a source of amusement, but what about for the tragedy's audience? Uncertainty over how to respond – is this funny? Pitiable? Just plain horrible? – is largely due to the 'comedy' elements in the *Thyestes*, which besides elevating the villain's intelligence also make his victim appear less noble.

Metatheatre and Eavesdropping

As intimated in the preceding section, both Plautus and Seneca use their deception plots to reflect on the nature of theatre itself, the doubleness of its words and properties, the doubleness of actors both being and not being their characters and of audiences both believing and not believing the fictions they witness on stage. This is to be expected: some degree of self-reflexivity can be found in almost all plays that deal with trickery, and the popularity of deception plots across all genres of Western drama rests largely on their evocation of the dramatic medium. Caution must therefore be exercised when investigating the potential coincidence of metatheatre in Plautus and

[51] The language of return and reunion in Act 5 may evoke equivalent scenes in *palliata*, as per Bexley (2022) 59.

Seneca, for while "theatrically self-conscious theatre"[52] is a well acknowledged Plautine trait, especially as it pertains to the *seruus callidus*,[53] and while scholars have likewise remarked its presence in the *Thyestes*,[54] correlation need not imply causation. It is not enough to claim, as Michael Grant does, that Plautus and Seneca share in rupturing the dramatic barrier of the 'fourth wall'.[55] Instead the following discussion focuses on the structural similarities between Plautus's and Seneca's eavesdropping scenes, with some accompanying observations on the relationship both playwrights establish between their trickster-protagonists and the plays' external audiences.

Though it features throughout the *Thyestes*, metatheatre is particularly pronounced in the tragedy's final Act, where Atreus in effect 'stages' his brother's revelation. The avenger enters boasting of his triumph: he has achieved the summit of his prayers (*summa uotorum attigi*, *Thy.* 888); he strides equal to the stars (*aequalis astris gradior*, *Thy.* 885). To crown his conquest, he demands that the crowd of servants "unbar the temple doors" and "let the festal house be open to view" (*turba famularis, fores / templi relaxa, festa patefiat domus*, *Thy.* 901–2). While these

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[52] This is the definition of metatheatricality provided by Slater (2000) 10 and accepted by most scholars working on ancient Roman drama. Gentili (1979) is an outlier in using 'metatheatre' to mean "plays constructed from previously existing plays", a definition I do not employ here. The term 'metatheatre' originates with Abel (1963), who classed it as an Early Modern phenomenon and as a separate genre, neither of which ideas has – understandably – found purchase with Classicists, although his overall illumination of the concept has proved game-changing.

[53] Moore (1998) and Slater (2000) are key studies. See also Muecke (1986); Hardy (2005); Sharrock (2009); Christenson (2019).

[54] Boyle (1997) 117–18 and (2017); Schiesaro (2003) 45–61; Erasmo (2004) 124–26; Littlewood (2004) 172–258; Mowbray (2012).

[55] Grant (1999) 31.

orders are carried out, Atreus describes with sadistic glee how he envisages Thyestes' reaction to his fate:

libet uidere, capita natorum intuens,
quos det colores, uerba quae primus dolor
effundat aut ut spiritu expulso stupens
corpus rigescat. fructus hic operis mei est.
miserum uidere nolo, sed dum fit miser

I want to see how his face changes color as he gazes
on his sons' heads, what words his initial grief pours forth,
or how his body stiffens, dumbfounded, breathless.
This is the fruit of my labor.
I don't want to see him wretched, but to see him *becoming* so.[56]
(*Thy.* 903–7)

Significant here is Atreus's dual role as viewer and director, which – as we have already seen – he shares with the Plautine *seruus callidus*. The first of these two functions is apparent not just through Atreus's obvious references to watching Thyestes unravel (*Thy.* 903 and 907: *uidere*), but also through the passage's representation of Thyestes' emotional and physical changes. Gradual expression of anguish may, in this context, evoke the actor's skill in formulating and

[56] Aside from connotations of spectatorship, the phrase *dum fit miser* at *Thy.* 907 also reprises the Fury's *miser ex potente fiat* at *Thy.* 35. Again, the layering simultaneously connects and juxtaposes Atreus and the Fury in their respective directorial roles.

conveying specific psychological states.[57] Thyestes is the performer to Atreus's audience, his distress imagined in terms of careful, piecemeal enactment.[58] As the one who oversees and provides motivation for this performance, Atreus is a playwright/director, a role that likewise affirms the dominance implicit in his gaze.[59] He commands how the performance will unfold, initially by issuing stage directions to his servants (*Thy.* 901–2, above) and then by commenting from the side lines.

Immediately proceeding Atreus's description at 903–7, Thyestes is brought on stage, presumably via the *ekkyklema*.[60] He is full to bursting and toasting his (supposed) good fortune with cups of bloodied wine. With Thyestes now in view, Atreus issues yet another description of his brother's appearance (*Thy.* 909–13) and an introductory cue for his brother's monody (*Thy.* 918–19), which he stays to listen to, all without Thyestes being aware of his presence. This convention of eavesdropping and extended asides is decidedly postclassical (though embryonic versions can be found in Aristophanes).[61] It is also, fundamentally, a convention of comic theatre (despite its substantial role in later Western tragedy). It reaches its most elaborate and extended form in Plautus, who exploits its metatheatrical potential for creating embedded 'plays-within-a-

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[57] Bexley (2022) 65. See also Mowbray (2012) 402.

[58] As Goldberg (1996) 281 notes, Thyestes' gradual expression of anguish occupies most of Act and is brought about by Atreus's teasingly piecemeal revelations. In this broad sense, Thyestes continues as actor to Atreus's director for the whole latter part of the Act.

[59] On the coincidence of viewing and power in Senecan tragedy, see Littlewood (2004) 175–94.

[60] The most likely performance scenario; see Fitch (2018) 309n43 and Boyle (2017) 398–99.

[61] Tarrant (1978) 242–46 and n132. Bain (1977) 150 remarks that the eavesdropping aside found in New Comedy has no analogy in classical tragedy.

play', in which action unfolds in tandem with real dramatic time.[62] The core effect of such eavesdropping asides, in Plautus and in Seneca, is their establishment of an internal 'fourth wall', which configures certain characters as the objects of others' scrutiny, in turn drawing attention to their status as performers and enhancing audience awareness of its presence at a play. This kind of non-illusory metatheatre, which foregrounds the business of acting, is more characteristic of comedy than tragedy,[63] because of its ability to disrupt serious scenes by highlighting a play's fabricated nature and focusing on the practicalities and trappings of theatrical performance, the sorts of quotidian details that ancient tragedy prefers to hide from view.

Multiple comedy elements are apparent in Atreus's eavesdropping at *Thyestes* 908–19. Notably, the description of Thyestes' drunken, supine state (909–13), delivered while Thyestes himself is also present on stage, may betray the influence of comedy at more than just the broad level of convention. This technique belongs to the Senecan category of 'running commentaries',

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[62] Thus, Lowe (1992) 165–6: "there is good reason to believe that Plautus developed the eavesdropping convention...and used it in insertions of his own invention. In particular, the technique whereby two characters eavesdrop on the dialogue of two others and themselves carry on an aside dialogue, necessarily involving four speaking characters, has no known Greek parallels and seems a Roman development." The intrinsically Plautine quality of eavesdropping scenes is asserted, with varying degrees of implicitness, by Moore (1998) and Slater (2000). Lowe (1989) 396–97 argues for the eavesdropping scene at *Persa* 548–74 being a Plautine expansion, and Lefèvre (2003/4) asserts Plautus's distinctive use of asides, including the eavesdropping aside, in comparison to Terence and extant examples from Greek New Comedy.

[63] Muecke (1986) 222. Although Muecke overstates the distinction between comedy's and tragedy's use of non-illusory material (costume is, for instance, a big issue in the later scenes of Euripides' *Heracles*), nonetheless the basic idea holds true. Similarly, Gutzwiller (2000) 103–5 notes that Menander tends to preserve the fictional pretence of drama, whereas "Aristophanic and Plautine characters frequently call attention to theatrical convention."

that is, verbal accounts of stage action delivered simultaneously to the action they describe.[64] They have long proved puzzling to scholars, who have attributed them, variously, to Seneca composing tragedies for recitation rather than performance,[65] to the influence of pantomime,[66] or to the playwright's Stoic background.[67] What has not been recognized, however, is the existence of a substantial Plautine precedent: Periplectomenus narrates Palaestrio's movements as the latter cogitates a plan on stage, in full view of the audience (*Mil.* 200–15). Plautus's employment of the technique generates obviously comic effects, not just because Palaestrio's gestures are clichéd and exaggerated, but because the very fact of Periplectomenus's narration lends Palaestrio's behavior a performed quality, makes it seem artificial and staged. Although more subdued than Periplectomenus's, Atreus's running commentary achieves a similar result, by hinting at the actor behind Thyestes' role. It concentrates audience attention on props, setting and individual gestures, while the scene's inset quality accentuates its sense of artifice: this is not simply Thyestes being drunk, but his *performing* drunkenness, before Atreus's satisfied gaze. Atreus even commands his brother, aside, not to refrain from drinking (*ne parce potu*, *Thy.* 914), an utterance that contributes to the scene's 'comedy elements' first because it is associated with the sarcastic second-person asides found in *comoedia palliata*,[68] and second because it, too, imbues

[64] Full summary and discussion of this Senecan technique can be found in Zanobi (2014) 89–127. See also Zwierlein (1966) 56–63.

[65] A theory proposed by Zwierlein (1966) and followed by Fantham (1982) 40–2 and Goldberg (2000) 223–25.

[66] Zimmerman (1990) and Zanobi (2014).

[67] Herington (1966) 434–35 and Bexley (2022) 186–202.

[68] Tarrant (1985) 220 with comparanda.

Thyestes' movements with a theatrical quality, as though Atreus qua director were instructing Thyestes on how to play the scene.

The description at *Thyestes* 909–13 also exhibits comic content, which strengthens the likelihood of the scene's overall debt to traditions of comic theatre. Atreus focuses on the grossly corporeal aspects of his brother's state: Thyestes is "heavy with wine" (*uino gravatum*, *Thy.* 910); "he is stuffed" (*satur est*, *Thy.* 913); "he burps" (*eructat*. *Thy.* 911), which sends Atreus into ecstasies of self-congratulation. Such low, quotidian bodily functions belong to the realms of comedy or satire;[69] they strike a jarring note in this tragic context. That Thyestes is drunk in celebration near the end of the play likewise casts him in a somewhat comic mode, since comic plots from Aristophanes to *comoedia palliata* often conclude with feasting and inebriation.[70] While these comic touches are mild and their immediate purpose is to accentuate the scene's grotesquerie, they may also suggest a more fundamental comic influence, especially in combination with Atreus's eavesdropping.

The biggest connection of all, though, is between Atreus and the *seruus callidus*, who are aligned in orchestrating events before withdrawing to watch from the wings as their performers take over the limelight. What we see in etiolated form in Seneca's *Thyestes* is a standard scene in Plautine comedy, where the trickster-protagonist oversees, in the sense of gazing and

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[69] Meltzer (1988) 315 calls Thyestes' burp Aristophanic, but see also Plautus *Pseud.* 1295–1301, where Simo chides Pseudolus for burping in his face, but the slave continues to do so, claiming *suauis ructus mihi est. sic sine, Simo* (*Pseud.* 1301). *satur est* at *Thy.* 913 may be read as evoking the key terminology of Roman satire, on which, see Gowers (1993) 109–25. Cowan (2017) is a broader study of Senecan tragedy's potentially satiric aspects.

[70] According to Hunter (1985) 41, such endings are typically and predominantly Aristophanic, but there are also some Plautine examples, e.g. *Pseudolus* 1246–1335; *Persa* 753–858; *Stichus* 683–775.

commenting upon, a scene of his own making. Plautus's *Persa* shows the *seruus callidus*, Toxilus, coaching Sagaristo and Saturio's daughter in their roles (as, respectively, Persian merchant and Arabian captive, *Pers.* 462–69), before viewing the scene in the company of the pimp, Dordalus, whom he has set out to deceive (*Pers.* 543–75). In parallel to the *Thyestes*, the protagonist is emphatic about his status as a viewer: he tells Dordalus that the two of them should "gaze upon [the girl's] beauty in silence" (*taciti contemplemus formam*, *Pers.* 548), which implies the behavior of a good, attentive audience. A similar scene features in the *Miles Gloriosus*, where Palaestrio, the *seruus callidus*, having instructed the courtesans Acroteleutium and Milphidippa to perform the roles of noble matron and maid, proceeds to watch the maid's performance alongside Pyrgopolynices, the play's dupe (*Mil.* 985–1010). The *Pseudolus* furnishes yet another version of this stock scene: Pseudolus, the play's eponymous hero and trickster-slave, arranges for Simia to impersonate Harpax and retreats to the side lines to watch the slave's ensuing deception of Ballio (*Pseud.* 956–1017). In all three cases, the protagonist is already on stage prior to the beginning of the inset performance, a structure maintained in the *Thyestes*, and one that highlights the *seruus callidus*'s framing of events. Perhaps understandably given the tragic genre, Atreus differs from the Plautine *seruus callidus* in not commenting, aside, throughout the performance. But the similarities outweigh this mild discrepancy: both Atreus and the Plautine *seruus callidus* create the 'play-within-the-play' (in the broad sense of engineering the events that lead to it, and for the *seruus callidus*, in the more immediate sense of rehearsing the key performers); both introduce the scene and use their extended asides to establish an internal fourth wall; both occupy the position of clever, evaluative viewers who not only appreciate but in many ways also dictate the embedded scene's content.

Admittedly, Thyestes does not rehearse his role nor is he conscious of featuring in a 'play-within-a-play', but this format, too, finds Plautine precedent, first at *Bacchides* 754–60 and 832–41, where the slave Chrysalus instructs the two young men, Mnesilochus and Pistoclerus, to go inside to their respective girlfriends and commence drinking, and then orders that the door to this interior scene be opened slightly so that Nicobulus, Mnesilochus's irate father, can spy upon – and misinterpret – his son's delinquency. While the scene's convivial activity is a happy match for Thyestes' own, it is the dramaturgy that provides the real source of connection, by involving an internal audience and therefore being configured as a performance; by situating the embedded scene in an interior space (though in the *Thyestes*, unlike the *Bacchides*, this space is opened to the external audience's view); and by involving individuals who are unaware of being watched. A second, equally informative example is *Pseudolus* 130–229, where Pseudolus and Calidorus eavesdrop on Ballio's entrance *canticum*. Their appreciative assessment of the pimp's display, combined with the scene's embedded structure, designates Ballio's conduct as theatrical even in the absence of any conscious attempt at performance:

Cal: audin furcifer quae loquitur?

satin magnuficus tibi uidetur?

Ps: pol iste atque etiam maleficus.

sed tace atque hanc rem gere.

Cal: Do you hear what that villain is saying?

Does he seem boastful enough to you?

Ps: Yes, and devilish to boot.

But be quiet and pay attention.

(*Pseud.* 194–95a)

Calidorus's *magnuficus* (194a) refers simultaneously to the pimp's moral qualities (i.e. his boastfulness), and to his mode of delivery (its splendid excess); Pseudolus's reply, *maleficus*, confirms Ballio in his theatrical role as the archetypally wicked comic pimp.[71] Pseudolus's next line, his command that Calidorus be quiet and pay attention, also lends itself to metatheatrical interpretation, because this is a standard instruction issued to the spectators of *comoedia palliata* in the plays' prologues. The overall effect is to make Ballio's behavior seem staged, and to invite the external audience's appreciation of it *as theatre* even while the performer is unaware of his role. Seneca achieves a similar effect in the *Thyestes*, by having Atreus comment upon his brother's appearance and gesture, and acknowledge his own desire to watch. The double layer of spectatorship so germane to Plautine metatheatre is also present, fully developed, in *Thyestes* Act 5: the audience watches Atreus watching Thyestes, just as, for instance, it watches Pseudolus watching Ballio.[72]

The dramaturgy of Atreus's aside is unmistakably Plautine: there are no extant instances of this convention prior to New Comedy,[73] and prior to Plautus, no scenes that combine it with an (often deliberate) embedded performance.[74] Here, Atreus's similarity to the *seruus callidus* depends not only on thematic correlations (such as his quasi-directorial role), but on postclassical

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[71] Moore (1998) 98.

[72] See Petrone (1983) 9–10 for excellent discussion of how Plautine deception plots specialise in creating such 'double layers'.

[73] See above, n61.

[74] It is, of course, possible that such embedded scenes also featured in works by Naevius, especially given the number of characteristics his comedies appear to share with those of Plautus – see Manuwald (2011) 197–98 – but the remains are too fragmentary to permit firm conclusions on this point.

dramatic conventions that belong to Plautine comedy above all. This is worth stressing, because it allows us to differentiate Atreus's metatheatrical qualities from those other, equally theatricalized tragic deceivers like Ulysses in Sophocles' *Philoctetes* or Dionysus in Euripides' *Bacchae*, both of whom likewise resemble playwrights/directors in their control of the plot and the roles they devise for others. Of course, we need not discount intertextual influence from this other dramatic material (and I have already noted its likelihood for the *Bacchae*), but the dominance of Plautine conventions in this scene suggest a deeper overall link between Atreus's and the *seruus callidus*'s self-conscious theatricality. This is a very clear instance of comedy influencing tragedy.

Plautine themes and conventions likewise underpin Thyestes' portrayal as an uninformed spectator. I have examined already his naive reception of Atreus's performance in Act 3; a similar dynamic occurs in Act 5, where Thyestes plays the audience to Atreus's painfully elaborate revelation. He is first introduced as a viewer at 893–95, where Atreus wishes he could have held back the fleeing gods and forced them to watch the feast but settles for Thyestes' spectatorship instead: *quod sat est, uideat pater* ("it is enough that the father sees it" *Thy.* 895).[75] He is further characterized as a viewer when Atreus imagines his brother "gazing upon his children's heads" (*capita natorum intuens*, *Thy.* 903), and when Thyestes' himself, growing uneasy, begs for his children's company: "Come! This pain will vanish when I see you" (*adeste, uisis fugiet hic uobis dolor*, *Thy.* 1003). The irony of this last statement is that Thyestes pain will only grow worse upon seeing his sons.

[75] Seneca's Medea likewise plays with tropes of recognition and the victim's role as viewer. See in particular Littlewood (2004) 181 and Bexley (2022) 28–35.

Atreus's disclosure of information in Act 5 is so protracted as to seem a mockery of (or at least a self-conscious riff on) tropes of recognition. Thyestes plays audience to this performance also in the broader sense of occupying a reactive position throughout: he witnesses but cannot initially comprehend the atmospheric changes occurring around him (*Thy.* 989–97); he pays attention to but cannot decipher Atreus's wicked language games (*Thy.* 976–1005; 1031–32); he witnesses the revelation of his son's heads (*Thy.* 1005–6) and hears the further revelation of his own cannibalism (*Thy.* 1034). Atreus, concomitantly, requires an audience before whom to parade his mastery and from whom he gains validation.[76] The victim's role as viewer confirms not only the power of the protagonist's dramatic display, but also his intellectual superiority.

This motif, too, is distinctly Plautine. No other extant Greco-Roman dramatist aligns the deceived party so repeatedly and so closely with the *visual* aspects of theatrical performance. To survey a few, brief examples by way of comparison: although the deception plot of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* presents Neoptolemos as a (reluctant? strategic?) performer, the role of 'viewer' is assigned less to Philoctetes than to Neoptolemos himself, while Philoctetes becomes a spectatorial object;[77] Theoclumenos, in Euripides' *Helen*, is duped by an intricate performance from Helen and Menelaus but his reception of that performance is not fundamentally framed in terms of 'viewing' (and half the trick is, in any case, reported by the messenger); Pentheus, in the *Bacchae*, is deceived by Dionysus, and even though his stated aim is to spy on the women's rituals, his role within Dionysus' own plot is that of an actor, not a viewer. The closest we find to a Plautine scene is the trickery of Daos and Chairestratos in Menander's *Aspis*, where the

[76] On Atreus's desire for recognition/validation, see Braden (1985) 61; Littlewood (2004) 181–83; Bexley (2022) 60–98.

[77] See Falkner (1998) and Ringer (1998) 101–25 for further analysis of the play's metatheatrical qualities.

deceived party, Smikrines, models tragic spectatorship in his repeated assertion of learning (μανθάνω, *Aspis* 442 and 446) from what is presented to him.[78]

Plautus, in contrast, dwells at length on the deceptive quality of theatre's visuals and on the deceiver's manipulation of them. The first embedded performance in the *Miles Gloriosus* represents a sophisticated study in theatrical viewing: the clever salve, Palaestrio, sets out to convince Sceledrus "that he did not see what he saw", namely, Philocomasium embracing the man next door, which means enticing him to believe "he sees what he does not see", that Philocomasium has an identical sister.[79] In effect, Sceledrus must assent to the reality of what is presented before him, a reality authorized by its own visible presence. The scene plays with the inherent doubleness of dramatic instantiation, such that the external audience "both sees what it does not see and sees that it does not see what it sees."[80] Similar, if less pronounced themes of visual deception are present in the *Persa*, where Dordalus's act of viewing is thematically linked to a) the inspection of merchandise prior to purchase and b) the visual assessment of a courtesan's beauty: his subsequent agreement to buy her represents his having been 'seduced' by the theatrical illusion. Ballio in the *Pseudolus* likewise falls prey to theatre's illusory power, specifically, to the play's capacity for making things seem more real than they actually are: he is convinced by Simia's impersonation of Harpax, but when the real Harpax arrives, he is suspicious and tries to remove the man's uniform (*Pseud.* 1184–88). The episode illustrates theatre's tendency to dissolve distinctions between copies and originals and to ground identity in

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[78] Gutzwiller (2000) 131.

[79] Batstone (2009) 216. The first of these two paradoxical phrases owes something to *Mil*. 315: *iuben tibi oculos effodiri, quibus id quod nusquam est uides?*

[80] Batstone (2009) 217.

performance: in a world where everything and everyone is reified through acting criteria such as genuineness and essentialism find no purchase. Believing in the impersonation, as Ballio does, is no more or less warranted than believing in the 'actual' person.

In all cases, Plautus uses this motif to evoke the deceiver's superior comprehension, his or her ability to understand doubleness while the dupe is confused by it. Dramatic convention, too, contributes to Plautus's fascination for theatrical illusion because postclassical techniques like eavesdropping enable the playwright to depict embedded performances taking place in real dramatic time, that is, before an internal and external audience simultaneously. The artificiality of this effect heightens the external audience's awareness of its participation in a theatrical event: it prompts us to interrogate what we see and the assumptions we make about this material. Whether this convention is responsible for Plautus's thematic interests, or vice versa is unanswerable; what matters is their coalescence: the framing of the play's internal scenes *as scenes* invites contemplation of how, at a visual level, theatre both induces and defies belief. The same combination is present in Seneca's *Thyestes*, where dramatic conventions of framing and eavesdropping highlight the external audience's role as evaluative spectators and, conversely, Thyestes' lack of dramatic discernment. The two factors work in tandem, informing and supporting each other, and their dual appearance in Seneca's tragedy strongly suggests a Plautine origin: Thyestes comprehends Atreus's multiple performances in a literal and limited manner typical of the *seruus callidus*'s victims.

The final significance of Plautine and Atrean eavesdropping lies in its manipulation of the external audience. The play's spectators are encouraged to align themselves with Pseudolus, Chrysalus, Toxilus … and Atreus. Granted we should not overemphasize this potential audience complicity, because theatre audiences, unlike readers, do not gaze over the eavesdroppers'

shoulders, as it were, but view the scene front-on, which separates their perspective from that of the play's internal spectators. However, the common act of spectating, which audiences share with the eavesdroppers, tends to unite the two groups and create a sense of rapport.[81] In the world of Plautine comedy, this rapport means supporting the devious but thoroughly likeable hero (the *seruus callidus*) as he endeavors to satisfy the saturnalian requirements of the plot. Transposed into the world of Senecan tragedy, by contrast, this rapport means supporting the villain in his villainy, and enjoying his successes despite their obvious iniquity.[82] Light-hearted enjoyment of comic swindling becomes, in Seneca's hands, a morally questionable approval of the nefarious protagonist; the relatively gentle cruelty suffered by victims in comedy (lost money; damaged reputations) morphs into the vicious cruelty visited upon tragic victims (lives lost; families destroyed). If anything, the rapport Seneca creates between Atreus and the audience exposes the potential nastiness inherent in comedy's – especially Plautine comedy's – desire to laugh at others' misfortune.[83] Atreus, in the vein of a *seruus callidus*, is more than happy to joke about what he will do / has done to Thyestes, and Seneca invites the audience to laugh along with him. The discomfort we may feel in doing so highlights not only Atreus's sadism, but also the destructive antagonism of the Plautine comic hero. Seneca's adaptation of Plautine techniques accentuates his tragedy's grotesque atmosphere while at the same time reflecting upon the *seruus callidus*'s brazen lack of scruples.

[81] On rapport between actors and audience in Plautus, see Moore (1998).

[82] Schiesaro (2003) develops a similar idea about the audience's problematic complicity with Atreus, and how it is "made to realize that the aesthetic pleasure afforded by the play is coextensive with…*nefas*" (37).

[83] An idea raised by Grant (1999) 31.

One could of course demur that the dramatic irony attendant upon all deception plots – in tragedy and comedy – induces theatre audiences to share the deceiver's knowledge and hence, to some extent, his/her perspective. True. But Plautus's elaboration of the eavesdropping scene takes this complicity to a new level, by making what could otherwise have been a more neutral act of viewing into a self-consciously partisan one. This happens because the scene establishes a special bond between trickster-protagonist and audience: both watch the action from a slight distance, without being immediately implicated, which in turn fosters a degree of detachment and an ability to appreciate the scene's artifice. The dupe, by contrast, is too deeply invested in the scene's outcome to cultivate a suitably complex awareness of its dramatic illusion. The eavesdropper further shares with the external audience an appreciation of theatre as entertainment, as pleasure: Pseudolus admires the quality of Ballio's performance; Atreus enjoys the prospect of watching Thyestes' psychological collapse. This convention is a major means by which Plautus articulates the *seruus callidus*'s special access to "the meta-reality of the play"; it illustrates his "commanding position within the plot…[and] special relationship with the audience."[84] The same applies to Seneca's Atreus, whose interconnected position as arch deceiver and playwright/director is reinforced by his role as an eavesdropper to Thyestes' witlessness.

Atrean Afterlives: Hamlet and Iago

The story of the tragic avenger as *seruus callidus* does not end with Seneca's Atreus. As I have remarked throughout this paper, the generic mix of tragic villain and comic hero is a defining

[84] Stürner (2020) 145.

aspect of Atreus's dark charisma, the main source of his hold over the audience. It is this characteristic that is later refashioned into the villain-hero of Renaissance tragedy, who enthralls audiences with his cleverness even as his deeds repulse them. Versions of the character type persist across a wide arc of tragic material from Mussato's Ezzelino to Marlowe's Tamburlaine and beyond,[85] each owing a debt – direct or mediated – to Seneca's Atreus. As much as Senecan imitation can be said to form the root of "every major national theatre in the Renaissance"[86] so Seneca's Atreus "can be said to lie somewhere behind all Renaissance villain-heroes."[87] In most cases, such engagement with Seneca's play is mono-dimensional in the sense that playwrights appropriate Atreus's traits without interrogating their comic background. Two exceptions, however, are Shakespeare's Hamlet and Iago, both of whom demonstrate the playwright's deep and creative engagement with the *seruus callidus* prototype underlying Seneca's Atreus. These two figures represent one of the most significant chapters in Atreus's reception, chiefly because their own generic amalgam suggests that Shakespeare recognized the 'comedy' elements of Seneca's Atreus and exploited their theatrical potential accordingly. Each also embodies a development of Atreus's tragicomic features, with Hamlet's wittiness tending to impede rather than aid his pursuit of revenge, while Iago's Atrean traits steadily push the play's events from the realm of comedy to that of tragedy. Both deserve inclusion here as corroborative examples of Atreus's Plautine qualities, which Shakespeare appears to have understood centuries in advance of any classical scholars.

[85] On the Renaissance and Early Modern afterlife of Seneca's Atreus, see Davis (2003) 86–133 and Star (2017) 139–58.

[86] The oft-quoted assertion of Braden (1985) 105.

[87] Perry (2020) 245.

Hamlet is both a Senecan avenger and Plautine trickster; these two aspects of his persona have received separate study but have not been viewed in tandem as evoking and likely being inspired by the single source of Seneca's Atreus. *Hamlet*'s debt to Roman comedy is explored chiefly by Robert Miola, who argues for the protagonist's sustained resemblance to the Plautine *seruus callidus*.[88] Similarities are not far to seek: Hamlet displays a talent for improvisation, performing roles as the occasions demands;[89] he is a master of language, who revels in word play and enjoys exercising his wit purely for its own sake; he is the tragedy's most intelligent character, a trait he indulges especially in the presence of the play's *senes*, Polonius and Claudius,[90] whom he delights in outwitting; he assumes the role of director, instructing others in how to perform their parts (nor is this instruction limited to the acting troupe, for Hamlet also counsels Gertrude in III.iv.181–200); his plotting is overtly metatheatrical, as he stages a 'play-within-the-play' to trick Claudius into a revelation of conscience; and he maintains throughout the tragedy a special relationship with the external audience, through soliloquies, asides, his own occasional role as spectator, and the superior position he assumes in any given exchange.

Miola's list of features can be expanded to include motifs of hierarchical inversion, which Hamlet evinces chiefly by adopting the trickster-slave role despite his status as prince, and more explicitly, in his occasional wish to assume a lower social rank. In Act 1 scene 2, when Horatio

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[88] Miola (1994) 174–87. Shakespeare's knowledge of Plautus now seems indisputable; see Tatum (2019) 83–85. Broader studies of comedy in *Hamlet* (i.e. those not focusing directly on influence from *palliata*) include Newton (1979); Snyder (1979); Draudt (2002).

[89] A trait noted by Miola (1994) 181. See Slater (2000) on improvisation as a key characteristic of the Plautine *seruus callidus*.

[90] Thus, Miola (1994) 174: "Polonius is a New Comic *pater* relocated into the murky world of Elsinore" On Hamlet's verbal skill as an essentially comic trait, see Draudt (2002).

commends himself to Hamlet as "your poor servant ever", Hamlet replies, "Sir, my good friend, I'll change that name with you" (I.ii.162–63). Besides voicing a desire to escape the burden of his current troubles, Hamlet's response evokes the topsy-turvy world of Plautine comedy, by which it frames the protagonist's ensuing assumption of 'low' roles and the tragedy's attendant incorporation of low genres. The effect is reinforced when Hamlet, marveling at the Player's thespian skill, chides himself for failing to enact the avenger's part with sufficient mettle: "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" (II.ii.560). Once again, slavery functions both as a term of self-denigration and as a role Hamlet perceives himself as occupying. Evocation of the *seruus callidus* seems likely here because in the exchange immediately preceding this soliloquy, Hamlet, like the clever slave, has been devising a performance for the purpose of trickery. The soliloquy's position at the scene's end is also reminiscent of Plautine conventions, where the clever slave remains on stage after all other speakers have left, pondering his apparent powerlessness (e.g. *Asin.* 249–66; *Epid.* 81–103; *Mostell.* 348–62; *Pseud.* 395–414).[91] In Hamlet's case, such comic aporia is central to his tragic persona.

Significantly, this same soliloquy is also one of Hamlet's most Atrean moments. Curtis Perry has shown how the phrase "peasant slave" echoes John Studley's "o coward, peasant slave" in the latter's translation of *Hercules Oetaeus*, the original Latin line being *ignaue, iners, eneruis* (*H.O.* 1721), itself a direct echo of Seneca's Atreus: *ignaue, iners, eneruis* (*Thy.* 176).[92] Hence a line that evokes the world of Plautine comedy also turns out to have roots in Senecan

[91] Despite precedents in Greek drama – noted by Bain (1977) 155–56 – the convention is characteristically Plautine: see Christenson (2020) 194.

[92] Perry (2020) 79. See also Taylor (1988).

tragedy. Such Atrean undertones grow more apparent later in the soliloquy, as Hamlet upbraids himself for his present inactivity:

Hamlet: But I am pigeon-livered, and lack gall

To make oppression bitter, or ere this

I should ha' fatted all the region kites

With this slave's offal. Bloody, bawdy villain!

Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!

(II.ii.588–92)

Allusions to Atreus are unmistakable: Hamlet follows Seneca's protagonist in using self-criticism as a spur to action; in stressing that his revenge ought already to have taken place ("I should ha"; Sen. *Thy.* 181: *debebat*); and in the exclamatory asyndeton of 592 ("remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless") which is not only a distinct characteristic of Senecan tragic diction (e.g. *Phaed.* 923 *efferatur castus intactus rudis*, and *Med.* 390 *haeret minatur aestuat queritur gemit*) but also recalls in its assonance the interwoven sounds of *ignaue iners eneruis* (*Thy.* 176).[93] Hamlet's comparing himself, in his hesitant volubility, to a prostitute and scullery maid (II.ii 597–99, adopting the Folio reading of 'scullion') may also evoke Atreus's identification with a female role, as the latter associates his victim status with that of Procne (*Thy.* 275–76). Need and desire for action characterizes both the Senecan and the Shakespearean protagonist; Hamlet is at his most Atrean when he reflects on the activity demanded of him by circumstances, role, and

[93] Correspondences noted broadly by Burrow (2013) 174–75.

reputation.[94] Like Atreus, Hamlet knows he has to play the tragic avenger; unlike Atreus, he's rarely comfortable with the part.

Besides this moment of direct verbal allusion there are at least two other likely instances where Hamlet embodies the Atrean combination of tragic avenger as comic hero. The first is Hamlet's staging of the *Mousetrap*, an activity that owes a clear debt to the Plautine *seruus callidus* in highlighting the protagonist's directorial role and metacompositional manipulation of the plot. The scene even exhibits distinctly Plautine dramaturgy by having Hamlet comment, aside, throughout the performance, an action that is superfluous to the creation of a fourth wall in this case (because Hamlet and his companions are *actual* spectators at an *actual* play), but serves to emphasize, in Plautine fashion, the protagonist's superior knowledge of the performance's content and purpose. Further adaptation of Plautine conventions can be seen in Hamlet's assuring an uneasy Claudius that the players "do but jest" (III.ii.240), in contrast to the *seruus callidus* who typically guides his dupe to accept the validity of an enactment designed to trick him. Claudius, however, follows the Plautine dupe in confusing theatrical representation with reality and taking Gonzago's murder as a personal affront; the representation succeeds in its deceptive aim, only in this case, the deception rests upon truth.[95]

The Atrean elements of this scene are less immediately obvious but no less significant: the intended 'victim' of Hamlet's scheming, his uncle Claudius, is watched throughout, in anticipation of his reaction to shocking news. The physical and verbal manifestations of a guilty conscience are what Hamlet hopes to witness:

[94] As Perry (2020) 73–109 argues, these habits of self-performance and self-interrogation are Senecan in origin, despite their long tradition of being analysed as the epitome of Hamlet's modern individualist sensibilities.

[95] The complex interplay of representation and reality in this scene is discussed by Hawkes (2005) [1964] 62–63.

I have heard that guilty creatures sitting at a play

Have by the very cunning of the scene

Been struck so to the soul that presently

They have proclaimed their malefactions.

For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak

With most miraculous organ. I'll have these players

Play something like the murder of my father

Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks,

I'll tent him to the quick. If 'a do blench,

I know my course.

(II.ii.601–10)

Situated towards the end of Hamlet's most 'Atrean' soliloquy, these remarks are reminiscent of Atreus anticipating Thyestes' distress at *Thyestes* 903–7. In both cases, the schemer orchestrates a scene of revelation and hungers to see the changes it brings about in his victim's outward state. Such similarity of purpose generates similar dramaturgy, as well: *Hamlet* and *Thyestes* both feature a double layer of spectatorship, as the external audience, subsequent to the protagonist's introductory description, joins the protagonist in studying Thyestes'/Claudius's responses. Hamlet commands Horatio just prior to the *Mousetrap*'s staging, "observe my uncle" (III.ii.82), and confers again with Horatio ("didst perceive?" III.ii.293) once Claudius has departed the performance in distress. This self-conscious visuality likens Claudius to an actor in Hamlet's plot, someone whose emotional state is not just prompted but fully devised by Hamlet qua director, just as Thyestes' psychological disintegration is overseen and guaranteed by Atreus, and more distantly, the Plautine dupe becomes an unwitting performer in the *seruus callidus*'s piece

of intrigue. Both the Plautine and the Senecan material are integral to the episode's construction, their close union indicating once again Shakespeare's likely comprehension of the *Thyestes*' comedy elements.

The second example of Hamlet's Atreus–*seruus callidus* blend is his exchange with the king following Polonius' murder. Claudius wants to know where the old man's body is; Hamlet parries his questions with a sequence of jokes and puns that focus on food: Polonius is "at supper" (IV.iii.17) "where 'a is eaten" by a "a convocation of politic worms" (IV.iii.19–20). The theme extends into a more general *memento mori*, as Hamlet adds that fat kings and lean beggars alike are but two courses at the worms' table (IV.iii.23–24), and that nature's crude recycling of matter – a poor man may eat a fish that ate a worm that ate a king – shows how "the king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar" (IV.iii.30–31). The setting is reminiscent of the final scene in *Thyestes* Act 5, where Thyestes enquires as to the whereabouts of his dead children and Atreus responds with riddling statements that allude to cannibalism while providing superficial assurance of reunion. Hamlet resembles Atreus in treating murder as a sublime opportunity for exercising his wit and exposing his interlocutor's dullness. Like Atreus, he enjoys toying with the indeterminate status of the dead: Polonius is, simultaneously, "in heaven" and near "the stairs into the lobby" where Claudius will "nose him" sooner or later, and where he will wait for the guards' arrival (IV.iii.32–39). Atreus speaks of Thyestes' dead children in a similar vein, as both identities and bodies (e.g. *ora quae exoptas dabo*, *Thy.* 978). This resemblance between the two protagonists is strengthened by the subject matter of Hamlet's jokes, which need not, in the circumstances, have had anything to do with the consumption of human flesh and most likely acquired that theme through association with Seneca's Atreus. In both cases, moreover, the speaker's display of intelligence, combined with his ability to improvise a sequence of jokes on a

single theme, recalls the Plautine clever slave whose verbal authority and superior wit have already been argued to underpin Seneca's arch avenger. Here, the Plautine quality of Seneca's Atreus endures in Shakespeare's Hamlet.

This interweaving of Plautine and Senecan traits, along with the bald fact of Shakespeare's modelling his vengeful tragic protagonist on Plautus's signature character are strong indications that the Elizabethan playwright understood and undertook to reimagine the mixed generic mode of Seneca's Atreus. *Hamlet*'s infusion of comedy elements, its using them to structure relationships between characters (e.g. *senes* and *serui*), to elevate our sense and enjoyment of the protagonist's intelligence, and to introduce dissonant notes of playfulness into serious situations all suggest an origin in Seneca's Atreus, one that Shakespeare proceeds to supplement with additional *palliata* tropes about marriage and young men's affairs.[96] Hamlet occupies a quasi-Plautine world of duped old men, theatricalized intrigue, play-acting and puns. He also occupies a quasi-Thyestean one, in which a ghost initiates the action, inciting him to violence;[97] in which he seeks revenge for a usurpation perpetrated by the ruler's brother; and in which he is angered by what he perceives as the usurper's sexual unchastity (cf. Atreus's anger over Thyestes' adultery). Hamlet is, simultaneously, Atreus reinvented and the *seruus callidus* reinvented; above all, he is a distorted reflection of Atreus's Plautine qualities.

Yet in reimagining this role, Shakespeare also develops it, so that the comedy elements that help Atreus in his pursuit of revenge tend instead to hinder Hamlet. The verbal cleverness that enables Seneca's protagonist to manipulate his victim and elicit a laugh during the darkest

[96] Acknowledged by Draudt (2002) 72.

[97] A correspondence noted by Miola (1992) 33 and Braund (2013) 436–37, who also examines more generally the influence Seneca's ghosts exerted upon Renaissance tragedy.

moments of revelation becomes in Hamlet a source of repeated distraction that leads him to spar with words instead of blades. In contrast to Atreus's, Hamlet's verbal dueling does not serve the direct purpose of his revenge, and his enjoyment of intelligence for its own sake often leads him into dead-ends or overwhelms him with the desire for episodic point-scoring, so that he seems to forget his main task. His baiting of Claudius in Act IV scene iii may, as I have argued above, echo Atreus's triumphant teasing of Thyestes, but Hamlet is not in a position of triumph here; his purpose seems to have been lost and he is on the brink of being exiled to England (which means effectively being dismissed from the play's plot). His play-within-a-play is similarly ineffectual in its results: Hamlet seems to achieve public acknowledgement of Claudius's guilty conscience but fails to act on this information. Unlike Atreus, whose directorial role is an expression of supreme control, or the *seruus callidus*, whose inset performances advance the intrigue, Hamlet's *Mousetrap* disappoints in its promise of spurring the protagonist's revenge. It is as though the two elements of Hamlet's character, the tragic and the comic, pull in different directions: his Plautine qualities threaten to derail his intent by tempting him to engage in pure playfulness, while his Senecan qualities of self-exhortation and bloody rage fail to gain purchase in Hamlet's relentlessly shifting mindset. The union of tragedy and comedy exemplified by Seneca's Atreus is destabilized in Shakespeare's Hamlet, so that instead of being a darkly charismatic tragic villain, in the Atrean mode, Hamlet embodies more of a fundamentally comic hero misplaced into the world of tragedy. If comedy in the *Thyestes* enhances Atreus's villainy by celebrating his cleverness in the service of crime, comedy in *Hamlet* highlights the protagonist's weakness, hesitancy, and changeability.[98] In effect, Hamlet's comic traits become his own source of tragedy,

[98] Snyder (1979) 91–136 associates Hamlet's multiplicity of perspectives with the influence of comedy.

his reason for struggling to pursue the single-minded revenge demanded by his circumstances and genre.

A more coherent, fuller reflection of Seneca's Atreus is Shakespeare's Iago, who likewise blends elements of tragedy with comedy. He is the final example to be considered in this paper and represents a particularly strong instance of Plautine traits being used to fashion a tragic villain-hero.

Like Hamlet, Iago resembles the Plautine trickster-slave. Scholars have often remarked *Othello*'s reliance on the stock characters and situations of New Comedy / *palliata*, which it recalibrates into catastrophe: Othello is a version of the *miles gloriosus*; Brabantio a deceived *senex*; and Roderigo an *adulescens amans*.[99] Iago himself, occupying a subordinate position as Othello's standard-bearer, evokes to some degree the parasite-flatterer Gantho from Terence's *Eunuchus*, and more fully, the Plautine *seruus callidus*. Unlike Hamlet, he is of lower social status than his victim, Othello being Iago's senior both in years and military rank. This servitude to a greater man is something Iago acknowledges and resents (I.i.34: "'tis the curse of service") and he exercises his superior intelligence to dominate Othello in turn, making the general believe the unbelievable, namely that Desdemona is guilty of adultery. Iago shares with his Plautine prototypes a mastery of language: he can switch registers to suit his company; he enjoys bawdy puns; his syntax can be tortuous and deliberately confusing; he persuades others easily to take his words as truth. He also inspires unwarranted trust: his dupes call him honest at the same time as walking directly into his traps, and he convinces Othello of Desdemona's betrayal via the flimsiest forms of inference. He is a substitute playwright/director, who guides others in the performance of their roles, from instructing Roderigo to rouse Brabantio or pick a fight with

[99] The fullest treatment is Teague (1986) but see also Orgel (2003); Burrow (2013) 159–60, and Tatum (2019) 87.

Cassio, to telling Othello how to murder his wife. In this way, Iago's inventions become the substance of the play: what he plots and devises, though often outlandish in its fantasy, translates readily into the story's actual events; his lies, like the Plautine slave's, fabricate a new reality.

Iago's methods of deception are, in addition, explicitly theatrical. He himself is a talented improvisor, adjusting his plans and conduct as new opportunities arise, while his plot against Othello is framed as a miniature performance, with Desdemona's handkerchief as its main prop. There is, as may be expected, an eavesdropping scene that deceives the internal viewer and thereby functions as a self-reflexive comment on the nature of theatre. Iago has Othello withdraw and watch as he engages Cassio in conversation. Unable to hear all the exchange, Othello assumes the two men are talking about his wife when they are, in fact, referring to Cassio's mistress. Bianca's chance appearance with the handkerchief, an unscripted moment in Iago's inset scene, is a *coup de théâtre* that puts the seal on Othello's suspicions: this is the "ocular proof" (III.iii.363) he required to believe his wife's disloyalty. Ironically, though, everything Othello sees is a complex mirage, indicative of the theatrical audience's ability not only to believe what it witnesses, but also to make assumptions about characters' motives and fill in the story's gaps. Like Sceledrus in the *Miles Gloriosus*, Othello sees what he does not see, while the performance's content is simultaneously real – Cassio *is* laughing about his love affair; it *is* Desdemona's handkerchief – and false: there is no adultery, just as Philocomasium, in the *Miles Gloriosus*, has no sister. In both cases, the dupe interprets the performance along the lines devised by his deceiver, with the result that hard evidence becomes illusion, which is treated, in turn, as if it *were* hard evidence. In Shakespeare's rendition, there is the added irony that Othello, the eavesdropper, struggles to hear what is being said.

Iago also resembles the trickster-slave in cultivating a special relationship with the tragedy's external audience (notwithstanding his role as performer rather than viewer in the eavesdropping scene). He achieves this closeness chiefly through his "self-revealing soliloquies"[100] in which he admits his duplicity and apprises the audience of his plans. Iago's habit of formulating his plots live, in front of the audience, is a characteristic he shares with Plautus's *serui callidi* and which, in both cases, lends the drama an improvisatory air.[101] At the close of Act 1, Iago muses, "Cassio's a proper man: let me see now, / To get his place, and to plume up my will / In double knavery. How? How? Let's see" (I.iii.391–93). This is in the same vein as Pseudolus wondering how to obtain the twenty minae he has promised Calidorus (*Pseud.* 395–414), or Epidicus wondering how to extricate himself from the troubles caused by his young master, Stratippocles (*Epid.* 81–103). Not only do all three speakers question and exhort themselves to come up with a plan, but their speeches also occur at an equivalent point in their respective scenes, namely, at the conclusion, when all other speakers have left the stage and the plotter stands alone, devising his response.[102] Even Iago's "I have't" (I.iii.402) echoes the clever slave's triumph at having found an idea: *habeo!* (Ter. *An.* 344); *habet opinor* (Pl. *Mil.* 215, where Periplectomenus's description of Palaestrio is clearly meant to evoke the cliché of the slave scheming in soliloquy).[103] In Shakespeare as in Plautus, these seemingly improvisatory moments invite the audience in, allowing it to share not only in the schemer's thoughts, but also in the very

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[100] Ribner (1965) 113, quoted by Perry (2020) 244.

[101] Honigmann (2016) 164 notes Iago's debt to New Comedy / *palliata* in this speech. The 'improvisatory' aspect of Plautine comedy has been addressed most fully by Slater (2000).

[102] On the significance of this positioning, see above, n91.

[103] The first of the two parallel passages is noted by Honigmann (2016) 165.

construction of the play, its events and possible outcomes. Iago qua *seruus callidus* invites viewers to join him in orchestrating a tragedy.

One final point of contact between Iago and the Plautine trickster-slave is virtuosity, for Iago clearly relishes in sowing discord. He imagines himself as the musician, Othello and Desdemona his instruments: “O, you are well tuned now: but I’ll set down / The pegs that make this music” (II.i.197–98). He is an artist who enjoys exercising his skills for their own sake and is happy to wreak havoc on the flimsy pretext of having been passed over for promotion and the weak (possibly invented?) suspicion that Cassio has committed adultery with his wife. Iago’s malice far exceeds anything he claims to have suffered, which makes his actions seem more like a wicked game than a deep, brooding revenge. He also confesses to act in his own self-interest: “In following him [i.e. Othello], I follow but myself” (I.i.57). This, too, is like the Plautine trickster-slave who, regardless of his service to a young master, tends to act in his own best interests.

As for Iago’s Senecan qualities, they too are readily apparent. Curtis Perry remarks that “*Othello*’s famous generic hybridity operates even at the level of Iago’s character”,[104] which combines an obviously comic prototype with the grim violence of Seneca’s Atreus. Like the protagonist of the *Thyestes*, Iago is unscrupulous in the extreme and often inverts standard morality in a manner all the more unsettling for its evocation of *realpolitik*: Roderigo bemoans his unrequited love, Iago counsels him to make money and wait until Desdemona grows bored with her husband; Cassio grieves his damaged reputation, Iago argues that reputation is self-imposed and thus fully within Cassio’s control. His advice throughout the tragedy displays a distinctly Senecan, and even more specifically Atrean, perspective of radical self-sufficiency and

[104] Perry (2020) 244.

destructive individualism: Iago creates himself and orders the world to his liking, and he expects that others will do the same.[105] Like Atreus, too, he remains alive at the tragedy's end, with punishment impending but not enacted. Neither the *Thyestes*' audience nor *Othello*'s receives the satisfaction of watching the villain-hero brought low.

The form of Iago's revenge, and the power he wields over Othello, are likewise reminiscent of an Atreus-Thyestes dynamic. Notably, Iago dupes Othello into "adopting a kind of inner monstrosity like his own": the jealousy Iago so readily feels is imprinted upon Othello's mind, and Othello, in the tragedy's later acts, begins to speak like Iago, echoing his ensign's phrases and images.[106] In part, this transformation conjures the hierarchical inversion of Plautine comedy, where the master becomes the slave and the slave the master: Othello is in thrall to his clever social inferior.[107] But it also evokes Seneca's *Thyestes*, for in the latter half of this tragedy Thyestes, like Othello, adopts the language of his persecutor, repeating in Act 5 phrases that Atreus voiced in Act 1.[108] In both plays, this resonance indicates the overpowering effect of the villain's mindset and the victim's propensity to share in the same moral weaknesses as his oppressor: greed, fear, jealousy. Iago, like Atreus with Thyestes, seems to know exactly where Othello's weaknesses lie and how to exploit them. And the jealousy he instils in his master is the

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[105] Iago's self-fashioning is discussed superbly by Greenblatt (1985) 232–52. On self-construction as a major motif in Senecan tragedy, see Fitch and McElduff (2002).

[106] The quotation comes from Perry (2020) 231. Transformations in Othello's speech, and its resemblance to Iago's, are noted by Segal (1987) 264n55, and Tatum (2019) 98–99.

[107] Othello even calls himself a slave by the end of the play: "O cursed, cursed slave!" (V.ii.274). Segal (1987) 263n54 and 55 compares Othello's adoption of Iago's speech to Pyrgopolynices' mimicry of the *seruus callidus* Palaestrio at *Miles* 1120–23, which is also a viable parallel, though examples from Seneca's *Thyestes* are more extensive.

[108] On these echoes, see Rose (1986/7) 123 and Bexley (2022) 91.

equivalent of a self-inflicted punishment (e.g. III.iii.168–69), in which Othello becomes his own worst enemy. This, too, is at least a possible parallel to Seneca's *Thyestes*, where Thyestes is envisaged as being his own punishment (259: *ipso Thyeste*), both in the physical sense that he will consume his children's flesh and in the more abstract sense that he is the victim of his own moral failings. Results, in both tragedies, are cataclysmic: the sun in the *Thyestes* revokes its course, and in *Othello*, the unhappy general anticipates cosmic darkness in response to Desdemona's death: "Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse / Of sun and moon, and that the affrighted globe / Should yawn at alteration" (V.ii.97–99).

What we see in Iago, then, is an extension of the villain-hero embodied by Seneca's Atreus: despite being morally reprehensible, he exercises a fascination over the play's external audience, who join him in deploring Othello's dull gullibility (albeit for different reasons). His superior position as arch manipulator and orchestrator of the play's plot not only reflects the key activity of Atreus and of the Plautine *seruus callidus*, but also enables the audience to form a special bond with him through shared knowledge of his intentions, to which other characters are blind. Iago's wit is simultaneously appealing and repellent, attractive in spite of itself, as a source of personal success – and of the play's momentum – that we can neither approve nor ignore. The comic hero's achievement of trickery against less adept opponents is a trait Iago shares with Seneca's Atreus, which endows their respective tragedies with the upward momentum of victory at the same time as the plays' events spiral towards disaster. In Iago's case, manipulation is visited not just upon events and individuals, but on the genre itself, as a play that opens with a

comic premise (a young woman marrying secretly against her father's will)[109] is transformed into the stuff of tragedy, primarily through Iago's machinations. Shakespeare's *Othello* follows Seneca's *Thyestes* in enlisting comic activity in the service of catastrophe, where the protagonist's freewheeling wickedness builds upon the *seruus callidus*'s knavery while intimating its dark potential. There could not be a clearer example of Shakespeare's comprehending Seneca's Plautine intertext and appreciating its compelling dissonance, its note of levity and playfulness that makes the tragedy even more sinister, and the avenging protagonist even more morally questionable.

Such experimentation with genre is also experimentation with form. Seneca's *Thyestes* pushes at the boundaries of tragedy; this is what makes it so innovative and what Shakespeare found so attractive in the play. Through employment of non-illusionist dramatic conventions more properly belonging to comedy, through wit and wordplay, and through self-conscious theatricality designed to increase audience awareness of the drama qua event, *Thyestes* manages to infuse its tragic material with a spirit of fun. This is about play – not just play-as-theatre, but play for its own sake, as enjoyment, recreation, diversion. Atreus turns a serious enterprise into a game, and Seneca, concomitantly, invites the external audience to view it as such. This, too, is the core of Hamlet's and Iago's debt to Atreus, for both of these Shakespearean characters enjoy experimenting with the substance of their roles and derive deep satisfaction from holding others in their intellectual/theatrical thrall. Both evince, in different guises, Atreus's spirit of fun: revenge is a game for Iago, and for Hamlet, the font of endless clever distractions.

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[109] Though Orgel (2003) 105, is right in saying, "*Othello* begins at the moment when comedies end: with a happy marriage", it is also the case that secretive marriage lacking in parental approval can stand at the opening of the New Comic / *palliata* plot.

Implications of this tragicomic mix are taken even further in the *Thyestes*, where tragedy's transformation into a source of amusement involves an accompanying moral hollowness; principles like justice and piety are so easily manipulated, so open to being played with, that they become a sham. The tragic universe loses its anchor. In its place is the unscrupulous yet charismatic trickery of Atreus as *seruus callidus*, who orders the world to his liking. In the end, it is not a case of Seneca being too heavy nor Plautus too light (*Hamlet* II.ii.409–10), but of the two combining into something greater than the sum of their parts. For Seneca's Atreus, the Plautine *seruus callidus* provides a model of playful scoundrelism that darkens and complicates his pursuit of revenge not just by introducing a note of intellectual enjoyment, but also by cutting his activity loose from potential moral referents, situating it in a world of comic play, where nothing and nobody is sacred. Plautus's presence makes Atreus nastier and more compelling, grim *because of* not *despite* his levity. It is this combination of wit and savagery, audience rapport and moral vacuity, that sets Atreus apart from Seneca's other dramatic creations, and that grants him a long afterlife as a figure of enduring and undeniable theatrical appeal.

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